Groupe de Recherche sur l'Image et le Texte

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3

Imaginaire de la narration dans les productions littéraires mixtes (texte écrit et image fixe)

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Walks through the museum of images: openness of self-reflexive images in comics

Introduction

This article explores the openness in comics that is generated through their techniques of word-image narration and the self-reflexive interaction with selected media and their imaginaries. Umberto Eco's concept of the open work of art is used for highlighting the complex workings of the comics discussed.[1] This is complemented by an exploration of references to other visual media in comics. The self-reflexivity that often accompanies such references is seen as contributing towards openness in comics' images.[2] The notion of imaginaries – as described by Gilbert Durand and Wolfgang Iser – is employed for illustrating the scope of the self-reflexivity of comics images that refer to other visual media. Although popular approaches in comics studies often follow the paradigms of literary and cultural studies, a more anthropological perspective, based on shared imaginaries, can be useful for looking at comics because they focus on the image instead of giving the word the upper hand.

The very process of image-making involves simultaneously tapping into and asserting what André Malraux calls the imaginary museum, a collection of key de- and re-contextualized images, which Durand uses as a metaphor for the collective imaginary.[3] It is the latter's emphasis on the anthropological significance of recurrent images, their potential for transmitting clues regarding the collective mindset of an era, that is of interest here. After a brief discussion of contemporary comics, *The Tale of One Bad Rat* is analyzed in the second section to highlight the tools of sequential narration that are used for adding multiple interpretational possibilities and eventual openness in comics. *The Tale of One Bad Rat*'s interaction with illustrated children's books is also elaborated upon. Concentrating on the self-reflexi-

1 Umberto Eco, *The open work of art*, transl. by Anna Cancogni, Cambridge/Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1989. For an in-depth analysis of self-reflexivity in comics see Winfried Nöth's article in which he goes on to distinguish between iconic and indexical self-reflexivity (with the former including self-reflexive pictures) in what he calls a 'literary comic' (Winfried Nöth, "Narrative self-reference in a literary comic: M.-A. Mathieu's *L'Origine*", in *Semiotica*, 165, 2007, p. 173-190).

2 The distinctive effects of media in interactions between media are analyzed in detail by André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion, "Transécriture and narrative mediatics", in Robert Stamm and Alessandra Raengo (eds.), *Companion to literature and film*, Hoboken, Wiley-Blackwell, 2004, p. 58-70. Precisely this subliminal emphasis on media specificities in intermedial interactions is seen as self-reflexive for the purposes of this article.

3 See André Malraux, *Le musée imaginaire,* Paris, Gallimard, 2009.

vity of references to other visual media (like photography and the fine arts), the third section analyzes selected volumes from Yslaire's *XX^e Ciel* and Éric Liberge's *Aux Heures Impaires* to show how an imaginary of key images and media connotations is activated in the comics' narrative and aesthetic processes.

The rise of contemporary comics and graphic novels

There is clearly something about sequential art that has struck a chord with contemporary audiences. Although comics themselves might never attract audiences as large as those for films, despite the increasing interaction and interchange of material between the two media, their popularity reflects the dominance of the image in contemporary society. This profusion of visual imagery increases the relevance of considering the imaginary – understood here as a collection of images persisting through human consciousness, as elaborated further down – and in particular the implications of the imaginary for popular culture.

Even though sequential narration is age old – one needs only think of literary and material artifacts like Achilles' shield or the Verdun Altar (1181, Klosterneuburg) to recall the varied styles and vitality of sequential images – comics can be seen as reflections of the current, prevalent multi-media environment that has encouraged a change in the overall cognition processes.[4] "We have gone beyond the image, to a nameless mixture, a discours-image… a son-image", declares Raymond Bellour[5]. In other words, images co-existing with additional elements like sound and text have become expressive conglomerations extending beyond the visual mode, imbued with flexibility on the levels of transmission and fields of signification. By being surrounded by them in our everyday lives, we have become even more attuned to receiving and decoding the complex conglomerations of word, image and sound. This qualifies a medium like comics, which is rich in images and dependent upon disjunctions, as a potent means of contemporary communication. The graphic novel term, while serving marketing interests, can also be seen as a concession towards more complex comics.[6] This can be gleaned from the American poet and critic Peter Schjeldahl's description of the graphic novel as "life-changing poetry of yore… a young person's art, demanding and rewarding mental flexibility and nervous stamina. Consuming them – toggling for hours between the incommensurable functions of reading and looking – is taxing."[7]

The two characteristics mentioned by Schjeldahl, namely contemporariness – today's answer to the life-changing poetry of yore – and the potential for being challenging to read

4 According to Lev Manovich, it was in the 1990s (and consequently close to the graphic novel boom) that "moving-image culture went through a fundamental transformation" namely the incorporation of several kinds of media to the extent that "hybrid media became the norm." (Lev Manovich, "Understanding Hybrid Media", http://www.manovich.net/DOCS/ae_with_artists.doc, retrieved 31 August 2012. Already in 1987, Tisseron had linked the success of comics with the increasing ubiquity of the image (Serge Tisseron, *Psychanalyse de la bande dessinée*, Paris, PUF, 1987, p. 9).

5 Raymond Bellour, "Double Helix", transl. by James Eddy, *Electronic Culture: Technology and Visual Representation*, Timothy Druckrey (ed.). New York, Aperture, 1996, p. 199.

6 For the cultural, specifically Anglophone and Francophone, nuances of the term see Jan Baetens, "The graphic novel", in *The Cambridge History of the American Novel*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 1137-1153.

7 Peter Schjeldahl, "Words and pictures. Graphic novels come of age", in *New Yorker*, 81.32, 17 October 2005, p. 162.

are significant for the concept of the graphic novel and, to pander less to the high art-low art dichotomy, comics in general. The aspect of being demanding or difficult to read acknowledges the fact that certain comics entail greater interpretational work from the reader. Greater interpretational leeway in turn indicates the presence of multiple possible meanings, which can be generated through tools related to both the techniques of the medium and the content itself.[8] The dense spreads combining several visual techniques in Dave McKean's comics or Yslaire's *XX^e Ciel* series, for instance, exemplify how the experimentation with formal features can generate meaning through the combination of different techniques and their connotations. On the other hand, comics' affiliation with caricature is never completely effaced. The protagonists remain essentially drawn in a mode that is more abstracted than realistic photography or painting. Other comics generate complexity through focusing more on the story and its narration as in *The Tale of One Bad Rat*. Either way, complexity is brought in through exploiting the tools already present in the comics medium. These include sequentiality, which offers several possibilities of manipulating panel transitions, and the ability to mimic other media, through which their connotations can be both adopted and transformed.

Notably, the simplicity associated with comics which is supported by fluid transitions between panels is only possible through a specific choreography of words and images and their relationships. Rendering the same relationships between the different constituents of comics within and between panels more ambiguous or multifaceted can create openness. Such openness, however, is always contained within a structure channeling those interpretations in a direction that converges into the main themes of the narrative. Even though Eco himself used Superman comics as exemplifications of closed texts that do not call for multiple interpretations, several comics do incorporate features of open texts.[9]

Comics as open works of art

While voicing his dissatisfaction with the graphic novel label, Bryan Talbot concedes that "I do use the term to describe what I produce because everybody knows what you mean and there's no other option that's any less vague."[10] This vagueness regarding graphic novels lies in their being both like other comics – by relying on the same tools of word-image narration, such as sequentiality and speech bubbles – while also often manifesting more

8 Consider for instance what Ann Miller lists as the postmodern traits of bande dessinée: "metafiction; play on narrative levels through transgression of the boundaries of the diegesis (metalepsis) or through parallelism between first- and second-level narratives (*mise en abyme*); intertextuality; and the display of the codes of the medium." (Ann Miller, *Reading bande dessinée: critical approaches to French-language comic strip,* Bristol, Intellect, 2008*,* p. 130).

9 Umberto Eco, *The role of the reader. Explorations in the semiotics of texts*, Bloomington (Indiana), Indiana University Press*,* 1984, p. 8-9.

10 Pédraig Ó Méloid and Bryan Talbot, "The Road from Wigan Pier: Bryan Talbot talks with Pédraig Ó Méalóid", *forbidden planet international,* http://forbiddenplanet.co.uk/blog/2009/the-road-from-wigan-pier-bryan-talbot-talks-with-padraig-o-mealoid-part-one/, retrieved 31 August 2012.

complexity than what is usually associated with comics. Regardless of the label, several non-mainstream comics openly lean towards greater visual and textual complexity and the telling of stories that attain more complete resolutions (often as one-shots or mini-series). They often also go beyond the typical comics genres of adventure and fantasy by incorporating biographical or documentary, or other critical and less humorous, strains.[11]

Besides the seriousness of the themes in many graphic novels, there is often also a conscious interaction with other media, as in *The Tale of One Bad Rat*, which traces the protagonist, Helen Potter's coming to terms with molestation at the hands of her father while developing as an artist. This is combined with her keen interest for Beatrix Potter's stories and illustrations, which culminates in a pseudo-Beatrix Potter story, "The Tale of One Bad Rat", ensconced in the main tale **(fig. 1 & 2)**.

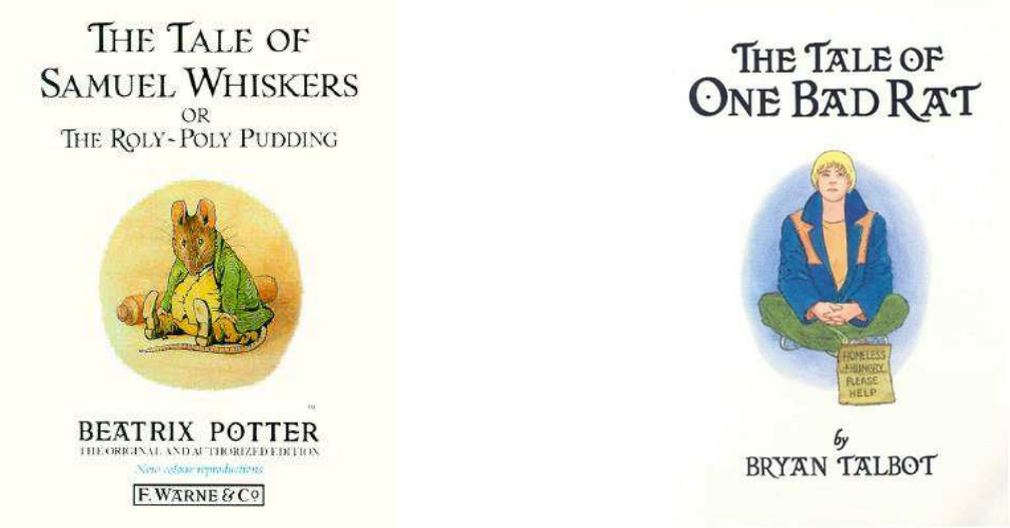

Figure 1: Covers of Beatrix Potter's, *The Tale of Samuel Whiskers,* 1987 and Bryan Talbot's, *One Bad Rat,* 1995.

While visiting Hill Top, Beatrix Potter's house in the Lake District, Helen imagines discovering an unknown Beatrix Potter story, "The Tale of One Bad Rat" and the next few pages of the comic book are transformed into pages of this illustrated book (albeit with two double spreads per page to underscore its status as a book within a book). Echoing Beatrix Potter's writing and drawing styles, the narrative transposes Helen's story to a fable in which she and her family are rats. This in turn consolidates the rat as an unusual but all the more effective symbol for the misunderstood, who are often marginalized and misconstrued as dangerous. The enemy is naturally the cat. Helen's fear of cats, mirroring that of her pet rat, primarily unfolds on a psychological level with the cat conglomerating all of her fears and insecurities. What makes *The Tale of One Bad Rat* stand apart from the commonly held, somewhat degrading view of comics, is the prominence of a psychological dimension. Art

11 Jan Baetens for instance speaks of an "overrepresentation of the autobiographical regime." (Jan Baetens, "Graphic novels: literature without text", in *English Language Notes*, 46.2, 2008, p. 77–88, 85). Cfr also his article in *Belphegor* ("Autobiographies et bandes dessinées", in *Belphegor*, IV. 1, 2004, http://etc.dal.ca/belphegor/vol4_no1/articles/04_01_Baeten_autobd_fr.html, retrieved 31 August 2012) where he attributes the proliferation of autobiographical bandes dessinées as part of an era haunted by the "refus de l'inauthenticité" as well as to the medium.

Spiegelman, as Paul Karasik declares, is regarded as one of the main artists to popularize this psychological potential of comics for recounting personal stories.[12] Knowing no boundaries between the real or the verisimilar and the imaginary, transitions between the two are effortless for comics and are rendered all the more effective through the aid of images.

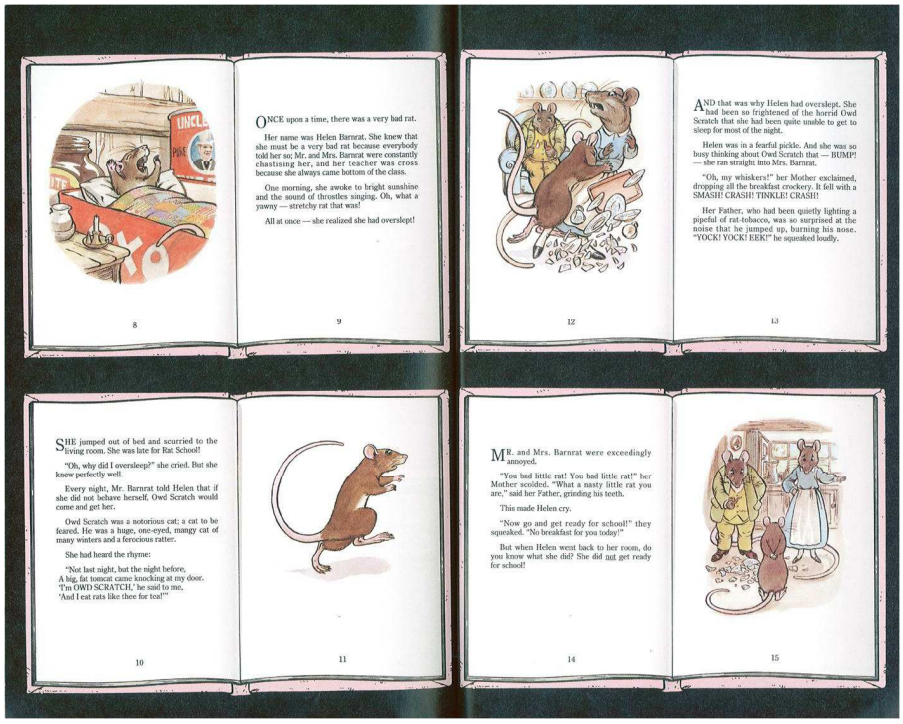

Figure 2: Talbot, *One Bad Rat*, 1995.

As a less literary means of looking at comics, Eco's openness can account for the effects of images as images in lieu of considering them as possible texts. This is important because a considerable degree of the effect of images lies in the unsayable. "The image is always sacred," Jean-Luc Nancy declares at the very beginning of *The Ground of the Image*, going on to elaborate upon the sacred as that which "of itself, remains set apart, at a distance, and with which one forms no bond (or at least a very paradoxical one). It is what one cannot touch (or only by a touch without contact)."[13] Hence, while a cognitive process is involved in interpreting the image as a representation of something or pointing towards something, the image itself remains untouched since certain aspects of the image work allusively.

Owing to the static sequentiality of the images, the kind of participation required from readers is quite different from that of the film viewer for:

> [...] l'image dessinée n'a pas le même pouvoir illusionniste que l'image filmique. Incomplète, stylisée, immobile, elle ne saurait être confondue avec une présence réelle. Il appartient au lecteur de convertir le visible en présence, d'animer et de compléter l'effigie en se projetant dans la fiction [the drawn image does not have the same illusionistic power as the cinematic image. Incomplete, stylized,

12 Bill Kartalopoulous and Paul Karasik, "Coffee with Paul Karasik", in *Indy Magazine*, Spring 2004, http://www.indyworld.com/indy/spring_2004/karasik_interview/index.html, retrieved 11 August 2012.

13 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image*, transl. by Jeff Fort, New York, Fordham University Press, 2005, p. 1.

> immobile, it cannot be confused with real presence. It is up to the reader to convert the visible into a presence, to animate and complete the image through projecting it in fiction].[14]

In other words, active involvement from the reader-viewer's end is entailed for the comics world to come into being, which can also provide more leeway for interpretation. The ability to piece together a narrative by merging the gaps between different scenes and situations presented is common to both films and comics and is likely to have been fostered by their gradual emergence, co-existence and popularization at the end of the 19th century. Taking up Gestalt psychology terminology, Scott McCloud uses the word 'closure' to denote the reader-viewer activity involved in construing any kind of sequential art.[15] In Gestalt psychology closure refers to the tendency of visual perception to construct wholes from parts. Depending of course on the context, three quarters of the outline of a circle can be perceived as a whole, a rectangle with a dotted outline will be mentally completed. Hence beyond the formal disjointedness, the conventional flow in comics from panel to panel usually allows for the sequence of events to be construed quickly and easily. As David Kunzle has pointed out, comics grew parallel to not only to children's literature but also industrialization and the consequent change of lifestyle it entailed.[16] With the spread of railways for instance, comics also became one of the main sources of diversion for train travelers, intended for quick reading and eventual disposal. That the panels are comparable to snapshots of views from windows hints towards the encapsulation of a fragmented mode of perception that has also been thematized by modern avant-garde art movements.

The several possibilities of closure offered between panels or the degree of ambiguity maintained can be seen as indicators of openness. Eco developed his notion of openness as an explanation for a modern, and eventually postmodern, aesthetic that manifested itself across the arts, covering the novels of James Joyce, Alexander Calder's *mobiles* and Luciano Berio's serial compositions. According to Guy de Mallac:

> Eco's purpose is to throw light on 'an episode of cultural history through a phenomenology of certain types of poetics.' The term 'opera' – the work of art – is defined by Eco as ... an object endowed with structural properties that render possible a number of successive interpretations, a series of evolving perspectives, but that also enable us to coordinate such a series.[17]

Proposed as an essential, structural feature of artworks, openness is gauged by the extent of reader participation involved in construing the meaning of an artwork or the interpretational scope allowed:

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14 Thierry Groensteen, *Un objet culturel non identifié. La bande dessinée*, Angoulême, Éditions de l'An 2, 2006, p. 30. All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

15 Scott McCloud, *Understanding comics. The invisible art*, New York, Harper, 1994, p. 63.

16 David Kunzle, *History of the comic strip*, vol. II, Berkely, University of California Press, 1973, p. 9.

17 De Mallac, "The Poetics of the Open Form (Umberto Eco's Notion of "Opera Aperta")", in *Books Abroad*, 45.1, 1971, p. 31.

> The aesthetic dialectics between openness and closedness of texts depends on the basic structure of the process of text interpretation... The reader finds his freedom (i) in deciding how to activate one or another of the textual levels and (ii) in choosing which codes to apply.[18]

However such works are not "open to any possible 'abberant' decoding" but remain ensconced in a unifying narrative and aesthetic structure.[19]

In the attempt to highlight the complexity of comics through the concept of openness, De Mallac's concluding remark regarding the "new aesthetics" that the open work addressed, "according to which art no longer claims either to know or to express the world, but seeks, specifically, to create", needs some qualification.[20] The acts of expressing the world and creating that are opposed by De Mallac acquire an intriguing tension in some comics, leading to a spiraling self-reflexivity that is not only concerned with the world of the story itself but also incorporates a specific kind of metalepsis questioning the perception and construction of reality (which, as notions of postmodernism underscore, has become a questionable entity in itself).[21] From the comics discussed here, *The Tale of One Bad Rat* offers a reality heavily permeated by its solitary protagonist's thoughts whereas the *XX^e Ciel* books offer changing, mediated combinations of fiction and history, rendering the two almost indistinguishable. In Éric Liberge's *Aux Heures Impaires*, the protagonist's subjectivity is shown permeating and transforming the Louvre and its (art) historical context.

Elements contributing to openness in comics can be systematized through Thierry Groensteen's stages in the creation of fiction.[22] Groensteen's stages include the invention of the story, its organization into a structure and its expression or production through a medium. The subject or the story's structure can be adapted to supersede a medium's constraints or even undergo transsemiotization or transposition to another medium. As elaborated by André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion, transsemiotization is indicative of the differences involved in media and the degree of complexity produced when media are merged.[23] Openness is generated at Groensteen's second step of structuring a story and at the third step of transposing the story into the medium of comics.

The coexistence of words and images in comics entails the careful, complementary division of the narration between visual and textual elements, both of which come with a distinctive, rich heritage of possibilities of expression – such as the novel and painting – that comics can tap into. Yslaire's *XX^e Ciel* books as well as the Louvre-Futuropolis series serve as ideal examples for the kind of destabilization within stories that metafictional and self-

18 Umberto Eco, *The role of the reader. Explorations in the semiotics of texts*, Bloomington, Indiana, Indiana University Press, 1984, p. 39.

19 *Ibid*., p. 8.

20 Guy De Mallac, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

21 Miller, *Reading bande dessinée*, p. 130.

22 Thierry Groensteen, *Système de la bande dessinée*, Paris, PUF, 1999, p. 64.

23 André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion, *op. cit.*

reflexive comics consciously interacting with other media as well as reality can engender. Such supplementary layers of meaning embedded within the comic increment the openness of the comic by making it possible for readers to interpret the literary and visual material in several interconnected ways .

As already indicated, the potential for expanding avenues of interpretation is not only inherent in the hybrid nature of the comics medium but is also to be found in the technique of sequential narration owing to the gutters between the panels. In this sense, sequential narration would appear to be an almost too literal realization of openness. Depending on the kind of word-image relationships involved, the dual-modality of the information also increases the possibility of reader interaction. Narratives where the images and the words do not point exclusively in the same direction entail greater work for the reader. Inserting more allusive, indirect connections within and between panels can contribute towards the openness of a comic by encouraging the reader to deduce the main link between the panel and also muse over the discrepancies between the panels and glean other possible implications for the story. Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle regards such ruptures of the conventional flow, particularly the insertion of indirect transitions, as an innovation.[24] A common use of indirect connections between panels in comics is switching between the inner and outer realities of a character. Such an interaction between the character's thoughts and perception creates an irresolvable ambiguity regarding the objectivity of the depictions.[25] An example of this can be found in the first few pages of Bryan Talbot's *The Tale of One Bad Rat*.

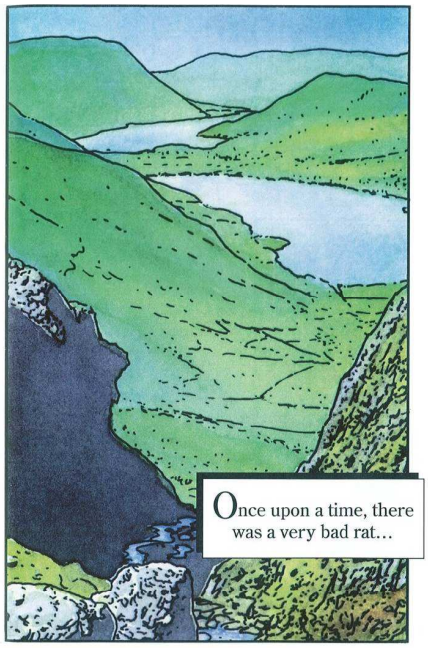

Figure 3: Talbot, *One Bad Rat,* 1995.

The first page comprises of a spread framing an idyllic landscape accompanied with

24 Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle, *Images à mi-mots*, Bruxellles, Les Impressions Nouvelles, 2008, p. 12.

25 On the ambiguity of perspective as a possible given of the comics medium see Kai Mikkonen's discussion of indirect discourse (Kai Mikkonen, "Presenting minds in graphic narratives", in *Partial Answers*, 6.2, 2008, p. 301–328).

the fairytale-like opening line, "Once upon a time, there was a very bad rat..." **(fig. 3)**.[26] On the second page this image is revealed to be a poster hanging in a bleak London underground station **(fig. 4)**. While Talbot relies upon all the traditional tools of comics – the framed images, a consistent, relatively realistic, unpretentious drawing style – interpretational scope is engendered by the indirect panel transitions oscillating without warning between Helen Potter's inner and outer worlds. The ambiguity, albeit limited, of her thoughts does increment the openness of the work because it allows for a glimpse into her mind and imagination which structures the entire story.

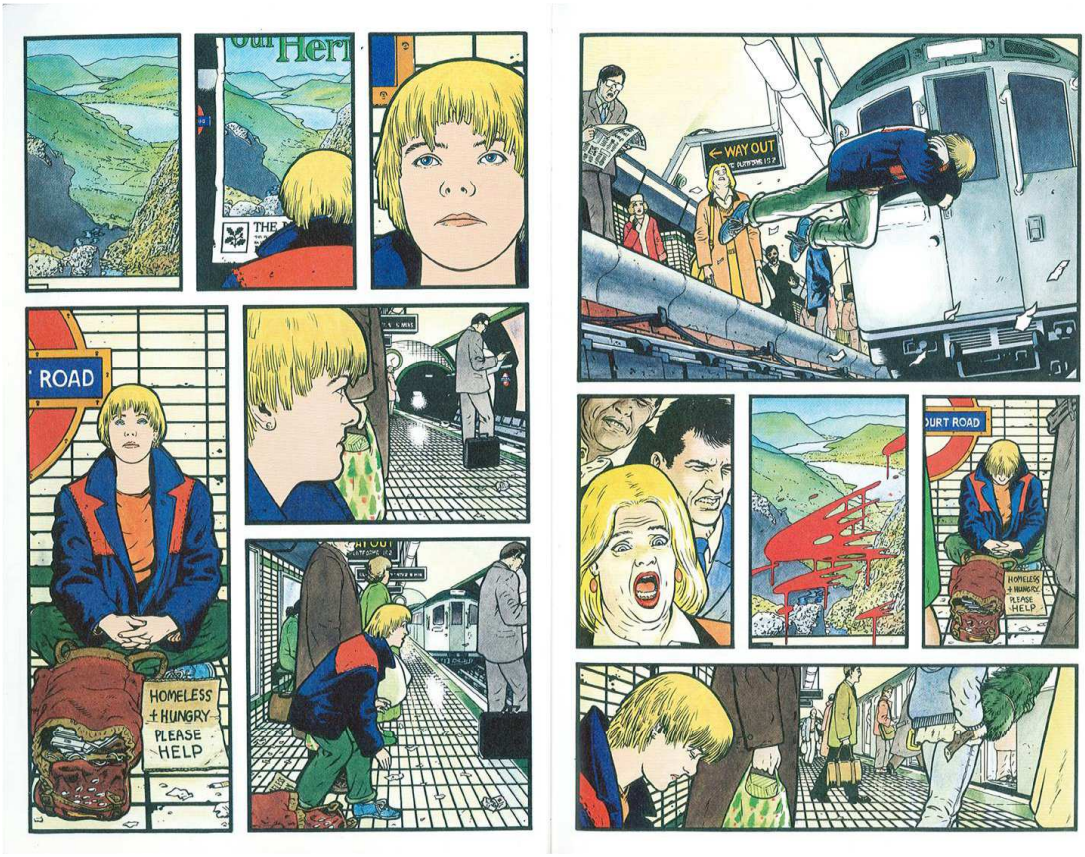

Figure 4: Talbot, *One Bad Rat*, 1995.

The first pages contain additional avenues of interpretation that go beyond a simple, literal reading. The image of the landscape offered by the first page becomes unsettling through the contrast with the underground station as well as the absence of words in spite of the people, which highlights the isolation of the protagonist who is not a rat but an androgynous young girl. That the landscape shrinks to a poster is also a comment on the desires advertising generates essentially through images. Without warning, the panels on the second and third page also switch between reality and Helen's suicidal fantasy of jumping before a train (and splattering the countryside poster with blood in the process).

This oscillation between Helen's thoughts and the external reality continues throughout the book, striking a balance between realism and uncanniness that is predicated on

26 Bryan Talbot, *The Tale of One Bad Rat*, Milwaukie, Dark Horse Comics 1995, unpaginated.

the visual level of the depictions as well as the panel transitions. Her pet rat, for instance, continues to appear even after its death, albeit larger than life and Helen addresses her monologues to it. Such uncanniness complements the disturbing story of Helen's attempt to come to terms with sexual abuse and her broken home. Her journey towards the Lake District and her consequent attainment of solace and freedom is a mental journey destabilizing the realities depicted. Yet it also draws from a specific literary and visual imaginary.

A narrative strand interwoven with Helen's journey brings in commentary on the media implicated in comics. An artist herself, Helen is an avid reader of Beatrix Potter's books and her move from London to the countryside strengthen the link between her and Beatrix Potter who also grew up in a home without affection and turned to nature and art for comfort.[27] In scattering references to Beatrix Potter's life and her illustrated storybooks on domestic animals, the darker sides of both the stories as well as their creator are brought out. Tellingly, the only instance when Talbot changes his visual style is for imitating Beatrix Potter's illustrations in the pseudo-Beatrix Potter story covering five double spreads which the reader reads with Helen **(fig. 2)**. This tale not only summarizes Helen's own story but, by mimicking the visual and textual style of children's books, it also questions the infantility automatically associated with books narrating through words and images by showing that such works are also capable of tackling more serious and difficult themes. In this way, comics like *The Tale of One Bad Rat* extenuate Chris Murray's description of cannibalism in the superhero genre to the level of media themselves. The comic not only imbibes other media or forms like illustrated books but also alludes to specific media traditions (such as the inspirational role played by the Lake District for British art).[28] Although this cannibalistic act questions the clichés attached to illustrated books, those associated with the Lake District are only reaffirmed.

The grayness of the division between illustrated novels or picture books for children and adults is already evident in works like Raymond Briggs' *When the Wind Blows* or Shaun Tan's *The Arrival*. However it is through the juxtaposition and even mergence of juvenile and adult literature in *The Tale of One Bad Rat* that a reconsideration of the conventional attitude towards illustrated books is called for. While pointing out that the basic difference between illustrated books for children and comics lies in the simplification of the syntagmatic relationship to make the happenings on each page significant and lucid, Groensteen does add that indirect relationships between panels and the consequent reliance on a broader interpretative framework can be found in a variety of literature: "le choix de réseau comme niveau d'interprétation ultimement pertinent n'est donc pas l'apanage des bandes dessinées modernes, à l'écriture plus éclatée, mais bien un principe général." [the choice of a network as the most pertinent level of interpretation is not merely the invention of modern comics

27 These similarities are pointed out by Talbot at the end of *The Tale of One Bad Rat*, where he discusses the comic in a brief essay.

28 Chris Murray, "Holy Hypertexts! – The Post of Post-modernity in comics and graphic novels of the 1980s", in Hamid Van Koten (ed.), *Reflections on Creativity*, Dundee, Duncan of Jordanstone College, 2007, http://artanddesign.dundee.ac.uk/reflections/abstracts/ChrisMurray.htm, retrieved 31 August 2012, p. 2.

with ruptured writing, but more of a general principle.][29] Moreover the incorporation of sophisticated, meaningful variations in wordless narratives does not render them ineligible for children. In fact according to Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott, the counterpoint or the disjunction between text and pictures allowing for multiple readings in children's picture books is an important indicator of the book's creativity and success.[30]

Figure 5: Yslaire, *Introduction au XXe Ciel*, 1997.

In *The Tale of One Bad Rat*'s pseudo-Beatrix Potter story, like any typical illustrated book, the burden of information and narration is carried by the words. The images complement the words; the visual signs are supplementary to linguistic signs, demonstrating a certain portion of the text without being indispensable to it. Although, typically involved in a word-image relationship that is less symbiotic than that of comics, illustration can offer additional directions for the interpretation to unfold. This kind of word-image relationship is discernible in the first volume of Yslaire's *XXe* Ciel series, *Introduction au XXe Ciel*. Here, the juxtaposition of re-touched photographs, snippets of fictional newspaper clippings and

29 Groensteen, *Système de la bande dessinée*, p. 18.

30 Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott, *How picturebooks work*, London/New York, Garland Publishing, 2001. The notion of disjunction was adopted from music by Joseph Schwarcz (Joseph Schwarcz, *Ways of the illustrator: visual communication in children's literature*, Chicago, American Library Association, 1982).

personal texts contribute towards openness through the disjunction between picture and text. As in the rest of the *XX^e Ciel* series, Yslaire dismantles the conventions of word-image narration and complexifies it, partially by strengthening links with other media. Several pages in *Introduction* mimic a computer screen, with a cursor at the upper left hand actually opening a menu listing the book's main concern, the "Histoire du XX^e Ciel" **(fig. 5)**.[31] This reference to the digital, age of webpages is further corroborated by the fonts as well as the arrangement of text and image in several blocks within the same page **(fig. 6)**. With their generous incorporation and meaningful exploitation of images from a variety of sources, books like Yslaire's *XX^e Ciel* series and the Louvre-Futuropolis series show how the scope of signification in comics is broadened through the self-reflexive interaction with key images, visual techniques and by extension the collective imaginary.

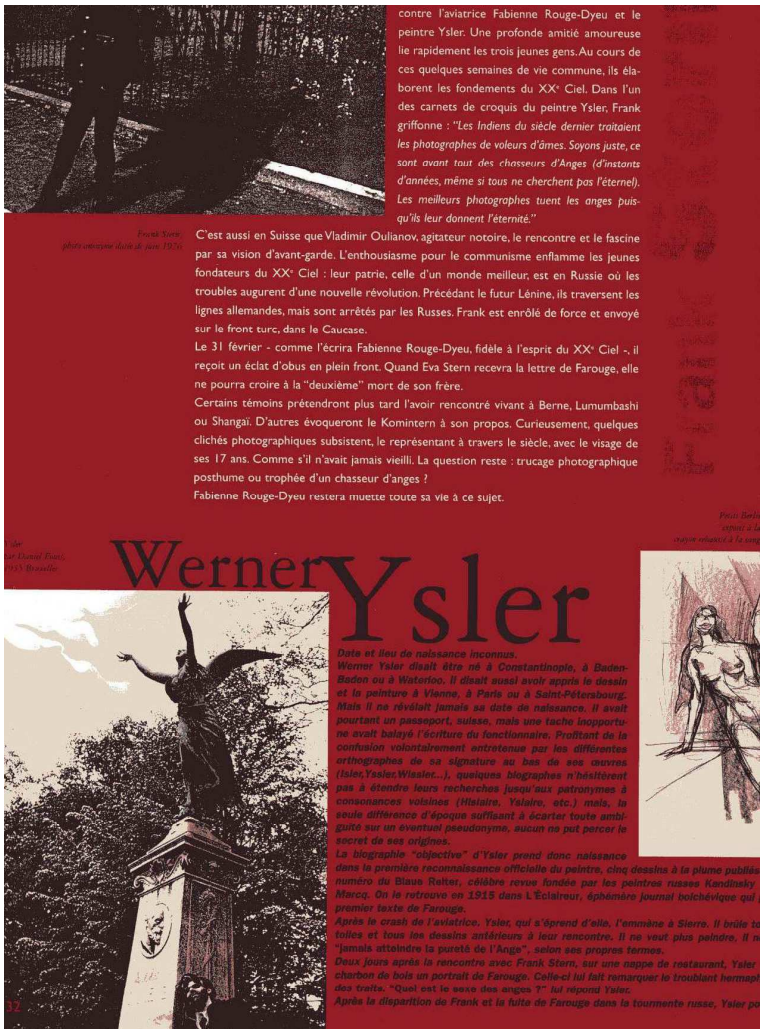

Figure 6 : Yslaire, *Introduction au XX^e Ciel*, 1997.

31 Yslaire, *Introduction au XX^e ciel. http://www.yslaire.be*, Paris, Delcourt, 1997, p. 10.

Self-reflexive images in comics and their interaction with the imaginary

In Yslaire's *Mémoires<1900>*, which maintains the *XX^e Ciel* books' preoccupation with intermedial and self-reflexive references, especially regarding the mediated nature of the image, one of the main characters, Eva Stern, born on the first day of the 20th century declares: "Toute ma vie est en photos et les photos sont toute ma vie…" [All my life is in photos and the photos are my life…][32] This quote can go a long way in hinting towards the power and relevance of images for the contemporary era where their ubiquity has made them an important means of communication and documentation. As suggested above, the contemporary prominence of the image is likely to be one of the reasons behind the burgeoning of graphic literature for a variety of audiences. Analyzing recent comics from the point of view of the imaginary through singling out recurrent, loaded images, could provide insights into their generation of openness as well as the visual content forming the collective consciousness.

In *Introduction au XX^e Ciel*, which offers an alternative history viewed through the eyes of the angel of the twentieth century, most of the information is conveyed through the images that the angel e-mails to Eva and those appearing on the covers of the "Le XX^e Ciel" newspaper. Images of devastation, often against the background of landmarks, are dominant. These include retouched photos of St. Mark's Basilica in Venice and the newspaper cover drawing with the Berlin Wall **(fig. 7)**.[33] Our angel also finds itself covering its eyes before the famous mushroom cloud of a nuclear explosion, one of the main images in the modern imaginary of disaster. Another image condensing the trauma of an entire people is the yellow Star of David, which in contrast to the celestial connotations attached to the star, has come to symbolize organized genocide. This star reincarnates itself as a wound on the forehead of Yslaire's alter-ego Ysler at the end of the book, interweaving a wide array of connotations from the arts as well as history (including the allusion to Guillaume Apollinaire's wound from the First World War).

Miller (resorting to Thierry Smolderen and Thierry Groensteen's article)[34] points out that pictures depicted in comics have stretched metalepsis through allowing "*bande dessinée* characters to penetrate its two-dimensionality and disport themselves in three dimensions."[35] Through their intermedial references comics allow readers to likewise transcend and explore other image-based media as with the poster in *The Tale of One Bad Rat* discussed in the beginning. Moreover, thanks to their visual and sequential components, comics can actively interact with the images making up the imaginary. This interaction is made blatant in Yslaire's construction of alternative histories of the twentieth century in the *XX^e Ciel* series.

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32 Yslaire, *XXe ciel.com. http://www.xxeciel.com/mémoires<19>00***.** Paris, Les Humanoïdes Associés, 2004, p. 13.

33 Yslaire, *Introduction*, p. 29.

34 Thierry Groensteen and Thierry Smolderen, "Tableaux vivants", dans *Cahiers de la bande dessinée*, 68*,* 1986, p. 91-97.

35 Miller, *Reading bande dessinée,* p. 134.

Meaning-making in comics, like other media, relies heavily on the imaginary in the sense of Gilbert Durand's "'musée' de toutes les images passées, possibles, produites et à produire" ('museum' of all past, possible, produced and to be produced images).[36] Moreover, according to Wolfgang Iser, who pioneered reader-response criticism and thus developed an anthropological approach for literature, "[m]eaning is primarily the semantic operation that takes place between the given text, as a fictional gestalt of the imaginary, and the reader."[37] Activated in every act of signification, irrespective of the visual nature of the medium, the imaginary channels and organizes associated meanings.

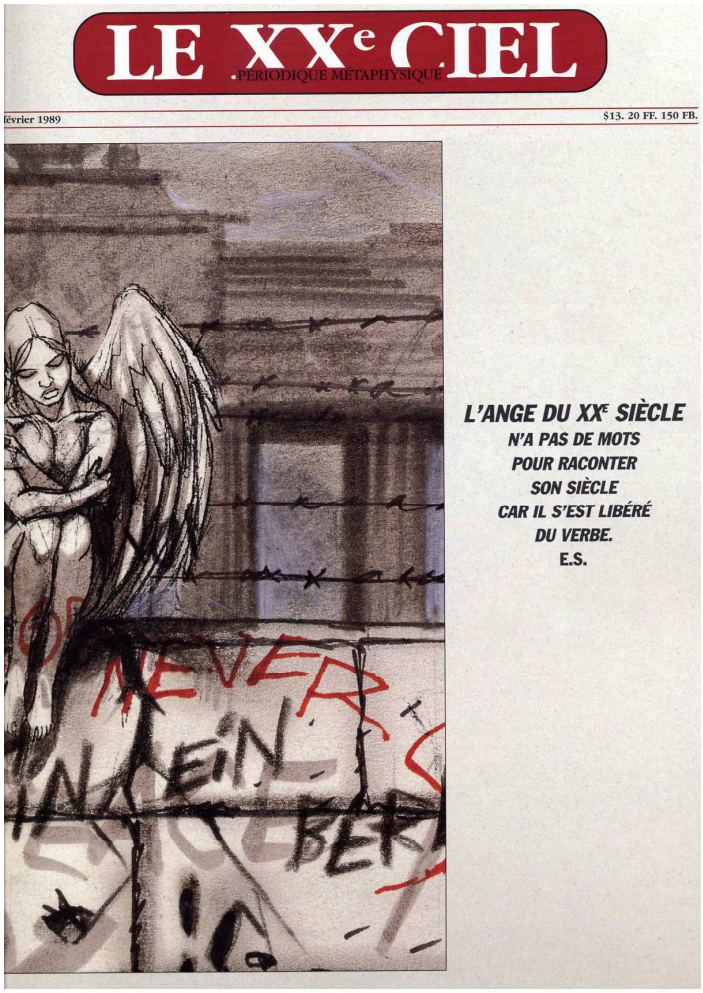

Figure 7: Yslaire, *Introduction au XX^e Ciel*, 1997.

For Iser the imaginary is to be discerned in the fictionalizing act of text. Similar to Cornelius Castoriadis, Iser uses the imaginary as "a comparatively neutral concept" that "is not to be viewed as a human faculty; our concern is with its modes of manifestation and

36 Gilbert Durand, *Les structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire*, Paris, Dunod, 1993, p. 3. The notion that the persistence and transformation of certain images is not only revealing for the general mode of thinking of the era but also affects it, can be seen as a retort to Roger Caillois' criticism that the difference between Malraux's imaginary museum and his general inventory of cultural heritage was unclear (Michel Melot, "L'art selon André Malraux, du Musée imaginaire à l'Inventaire général").

37 Wolfgang Iser, *The fictive and the imaginary: charting literary anthropology*, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1993, p. 20.

operation, so that the word is indicative of a program rather than a definition. We must find out how the imaginary functions by approaching it by way of describable effects…".[38] These effects are tied to the interplay – play that is partially aleatory but inevitably dependent on the openness of the work – between the reader and the text whereby "the fictive component of literature is bound to mobilize the imaginary in a different manner, for it has far less of the pragmatic orientation required by the subject, by the consciousness or by the sociohistorical, all of which channel the imaginary in quite specific directions."[39] According to Iser, the ground of all media lies beyond themselves.[40] Correspondingly, attempts to comprehend the working and role of a medium entail an awareness of its intermedial relations. His description of literature as transposing "the culturally conditioned shapes human being have assumed" finds a more immediate confirmation in comics owing to its visual dimension.[41]

Likewise the claim that "[l]iterature fans out human plasticity into a panoply of shapes, each of which is an enactment of self-confrontation" has additional relevance for the many self-reflexive autobiographical or autofictional comics stories.[42] The self in its performance acquires an uncanny otherness stemming not only from the constraints of the medium but also from the sociocultural norms underlying perception and construction when its transposed to a sequential form. This aspect is laid bare in autobiographical graphic narratives where the artist portrays himself in the process of narrating his story as it simultaneously unfolds.[43] This is also part of the self-reflexive facet of *Introduction au XX^e Ciel*, where in the fourth section titled, "L'Histoire de l'Histoire", Yslaire gives a pseudo-psychoanalytic account of the creative process behind the book and underscores the link between art and alternative truths while confirming that the ultimate aim of the book (or his art in general) is "de chercher l'universel en soi, de créer l'image immortelle" [to search for the universal in the self, to create the immortal image].[44] Clearly images are not only the main means of expression and communication but become in themselves alternative realities as confirmed by Eva's later claim that "… tout le monde le sait, la photographie, ce n'est pas comme le dessin, c'est la réalité." [everyone knows, photography is not like drawing, it is real].[45]

Already in *Introduction*, the angel not having the words for narrating the century and being "liberated of the verb", relies solely on images for communicating with Eva.[46] This manner of communication is closely tied to the medium of comics itself (which is the medium adopted by other volumes of the *XX^e Ciel* series). While having the advantage of invoking visual images as well as literary ones, it is the former that they rely most heavily upon. Con-

38 *Ibid.*, p. 305.

39 *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

40 *Ibid.*, p. xi.

41 *Ibid.*

42 *Ibid.*, p. ix.

43 See for instance Moebius' "La Déviation" (*Arzach, L'album mythique*. Paris, Les Humanoïdes Associés, 2006, p. 7–13).

44 Yslaire, *Introduction*, *op.cit.*, p. 63.

45 Yslaire, *Mémoires<19>00,* 13. Naturally this phrase also has loaded implications on the meta-level regarding the truth content of art.

46 Yslaire, *Introduction*, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

sequently comics use and contribute to the prevalent imaginary in the Durandian sense of "a museum of all possible images" by re-using key images, such as the form of the angel as an androgynous, aesthetically formed creature with wings in *XX^e Ciel*. One could go further to regard comics as reflectors, participants in the creation of the imaginary mentioned, which, as Durand points out, acquires global proportions due to the speed of communication. For Durand however the speed and digitization accompanying the ubiquity of the image threatens the erasure of the imaginary in favor of autonomous images:

> lorsque l'image étouffe l'imaginaire [...] lorsqu'elle nivelle les valeurs du groupe [...] les pouvoirs constitutifs de toute société sont submergés et érodés par une révolution civilisationelle qui échappe à leur contrôle [when the image smothers the imaginary... when it evens out the values of the group... the constituent powers of all society are submerged and eroded by a revolution of civilisation that escapes their controle].[47]

On the other hand one could regard this in a more neutral manner as part of the inevitable development of a global imaginary. Already at the beginning of the 20th century Heidegger predicted that works of art would eventually pertain to a global culture formed by technology instead of a specific region.[48]

Noteworthy is the anthropological significance accorded to the imaginary, for even when it is reduced to a mere collection of images, the imaginary is informed and formed by collective, unconscious knowledge :

> [l]'imaginaire n'est pas un mode d'irréalité, mais une manière de prendre en diagonale la présence pour en faire surgir les dimensions primitives [the imaginary is not a mode of unreality but a way of measuring presence in order to suggest primitive dimensions through it].[49]

What is of interest here is the recurrence of key images and the nature of their transformation which can consequently provide hints for the direction in which the contemporary imaginary is developing. The imaginary, as Durand mentions, plays a role in the signifying processes.[50] Combined with Iser's underscoring of the anthropological facet of literature through analyzing the fictionalizing process, this concept could provide a potent means of looking at the increasingly widespread practice of imagining through visual and verbal channels in comics and construing the interaction and transmission of various imaginaries through images.[51] In exploring self-reflexivity as an instance of openness in comics, the prin-

47 Gilbert Durand, *L'Imaginaire*, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

48 See Jean-Joseph Goux, "Politics and Modern Art – Heidegger's Dilemma", in *Diatrics*, 19/3-4, 1989, p. 10-24.

49 Michel Foucault, "Introduction", *Binswanger, Le rêve et l'existence. Dits et écrits*, Paris, Gallimard, 1994, p. 65–119, 114.

50 Gilbert Durand, *L'Imaginaire*, *op. cit.*, p. 31

51 *Cfr* : Richard Van Oort and Wolfgang Iser, "The use of fiction in literary and generative anthropology: an interview with Wolfgang Iser, in *Anthropoetics*, III/2, 1997/1998, http://www.anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap0302/Iser_int.htm, retrieved 31 August 2012.

cipal imaginary of interest is that of media, the visual arts and the image itself. While *The Tale of One Bad Rat* through its style and content subtly comments on the role and even the hierarchies of the arts,[52] *XX^e Ciel* thematizes the digitization and uncertainty of the image.

Precisely the concept of a digitized image-based world which is plural but also consistently reconstruable due to its virtual essence is a major concern of the *XX^e Ciel* series. Although, in contrast to the introductory volume, the other three volumes of the series are comics and not illustrated books, the link to computer screens is maintained throughout the narration of alternative histories of the twentieth century, with the entire page or individual panels acting as screen shots **(fig. 8)**.

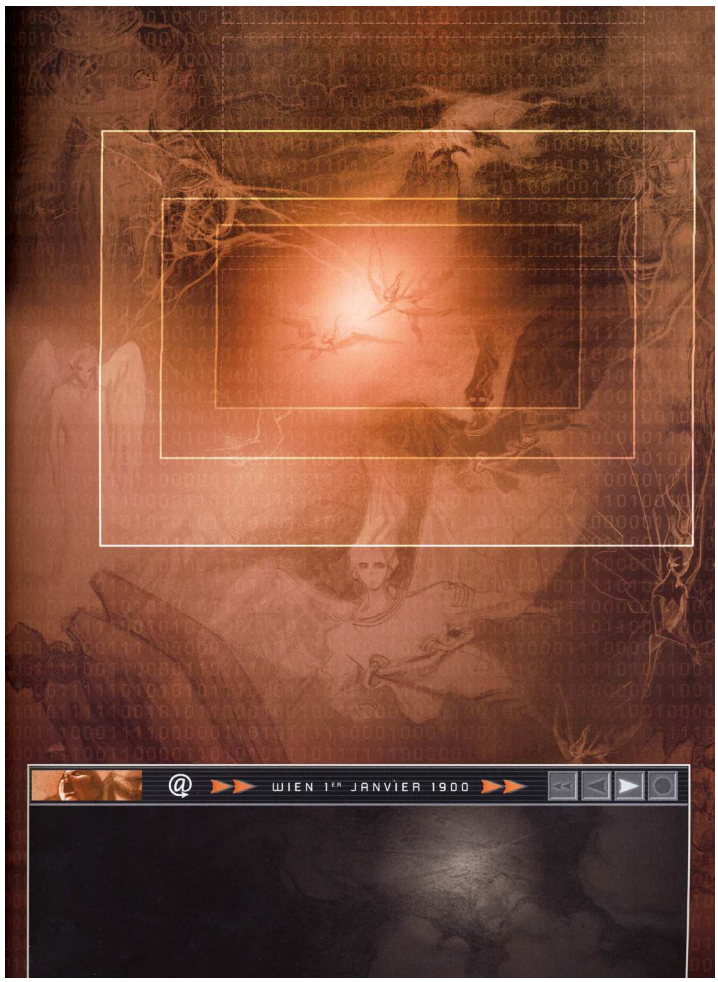

Figure 8 : Yslaire, *Mémoires<19>00*, 2004.

The combination of different media, such as photography, drawing and painting as well as the diverse visual styles bring in additional connotations associated with each visual technique. Just like Talbot's imitation of Beatrix Potter's style and its decontextualization in the realm of comics questioned the clichés attached to illustrated books and comics, Yslaire's incorporation of photographs, digital images and more traditional art styles highlights the connotations associated with these different media (most notably the documentary nature

52 One needs only remember the installation artist and his friend who mock Helen for copying Beatrix Potter's illustrations.

of photographs, the aesthetic value and subjectivity of art works).

Moreover, the multiple techniques through which the images are rendered also reflect their ubiquity in the contemporary age. Like the photos that are retouched, contradictory possibilities are emphasized and truth placed under doubt in the story itself. One of the key images of *Mémoires<19>00* is the photographic apparatus the Eva's father uses to document the birth of the triplets **(fig. 9)**.[53] Given the preceding pages mimicking computerized material with vague screen shots of angels, it is the act of viewing through an apparatus as well as the attempt to freeze life or store knowledge that the two techniques of visualization, transformed as metaphors, point towards. That all knowledge is mediated and doubtful is evident in the contradictory recollection of certain events in the protagonists' lives in the course of the series. Futhermore since the focus is frequently shifted from the heavens to earth, both the power (in the ability to objectify) and the limits of the voyeur are emphasized. The museum of images evoked here comprises of the technologies of making and transmitting images that provides a layer of self-reflexivity in the stories told. That the possible interpretations feed into the main themes of constructing and reconstructing history through images makes these comics open.

Figure 9 : Yslaire, *Mémoires<19>00*, 2004.

53 Yslaire, *Mémoires<19>00, op. cit.*, p. 10.

Another kind of re-working of images occurs in the Louvre-Futuropolis albums, each according to the style of the different artists behind each volume. Here it is primarily the art works that serve as palimpsests subjected to dissection, over-drawing and re-drawing in alternative visual idioms. Each case is not one of mere mimicry but of open appropriation and alteration **(fig 10)**. In this respect, it is noteworthy that all the artists involved (beginning with Nicolas de Crécy, Éric Liberge, Marc-Antoine Mathieu, Yslaire and Hirohiko Araki) have highly distinct styles and it would not be going too far to state that their appropriation of fine art works does tease the boundaries between the high and low arts. Yet the imaginary that these books engage with is that of the high arts, specifically their institutionalization and canonization through one of the world's most prestigious museums. Though appropriated in different idioms, the aura of the artworks, their status as important constituents of a cultural heritage is reinforced.

Figure 10: *La Jaconde d'après Éric Liberge* and *La Jaconde d'après Bernard Yslaire.*

Although the stories of most of the Louvre-Futuropolis books depict the museum in alternative and impossible situations, Éric Liberge's *Aux Heures Impaires* can be seen as a noteworthy visualization of the notion of the imaginary as a museum of images. In bringing some of the Louvre's masterpieces to life, and allowing for the protagonist's subjectivity to be superimposed on the Louvre, the comic shows how certain key images persist in the collective consciousnesses but are also selected, combined and transformed according to individual predilections, as in the case of the coming-to-life of diverse artworks such as an Egyptian mummy and Paul Delaroche's "The Young Martyr" **(fig. 11)**.[54]

54 Éric Liberge, *Aux heures impaires*, Paris, Louvre/Futuropolis, 2008, unpaginated.

Figure 11 : Éric Liberge, *At Odd Hours*, 2008/2010.

In Liberge's comic, the artworks have a higher degree of reality owing to the more realistic mode in which they are rendered in contrast to the rendition of the characters and the surroundings. This appropriation of artworks can be seen as both an extension of the artwork beyond realistic physical and conceptual limits as well as a commentary on their being. In *Aux Heures Impaires* it is art's need to be communicated and its consequent dependence on other media that is the chief concern. As the caretaker of the souls of the artworks, Fu Zhi Ha, explains to his new deaf-mute intern, Sébastien, who is the story's protagonist :

> Une œuvre, c'est exactement comme un enfant. Ou plutôt un orphelin. Et lorsque tu te tiens là, devant elle, et que tu l'admires de tout ton cœur, il se crée entre vous un contact privilégié. Elle devient ton miroir. Ôte-lui cette simple attention et elle n'est plus rien.[55] [A work of art is just like a child. Or more like an orphan. And when you stand there, in front of it, and you admire it with all your heart, a special bond between the two of you is created. It becomes your mirror. Take away this basic attention, and it is no more there.]

55 *Idem*.

The fact that knowledge of most art works is mediated, by virtue of being dependent on technological reproduction like photography (Malraux's imaginary museum or Warburg's iconology could not have come into being without the modern possibilities of image reproduction and distribution) qualifies comics commenting on art as another means of transmitting the knowledge of art. With its destructive climax of liberating the Louvre's artworks and confounding time, *Aux Heures Impaires* also indirectly draws attention to the fragmented essence of the comics medium, which not only contains the potential of openness but also expresses a distinctive kind of movement. This movement through comics panels, where "nous sommes en présence non pas d'une *histoire* qui débute mais de la *vie* qui continue" [we are not in the presence of a *story* that is beginning but a *life* that is continuing], is a reflection of the contemporary experience[56].

As already indicated, the fragmented nature of comics, which can open up to several possibilities of interpretation and (re-)assemblage, speaks to an audience accustomed to multimedia works and capable of synthesizing such information meaningfully. This could be one of the main reasons behind the ability of comics to tackle, with a visual bias, a wide range of concerns. The use of self-reflexive images in comics can generate openness by thematizing questions regarding the essence of the image in general as well as the status and function of the visual media implicated in comics, including illustration, painting and photography, as shown by the cases discussed here.

Comics' reflections of the contemporary imaginary

Referring to the current situation of "un monde virtuel plus vrai que le réel, devant les milliards de pixels sur nos écrans" [a virtual world more true than the real one in front of millions of pixels on our screens], Védrine states that "[l]ibérée de son rôle de mixte, l'imagination, tout comme la subjectivité cherche d'autres voies [...] l'imaginaire arrache le présent à l'effondrement..." [liberated from its mixed role, imagination, just like subjectivity, seeks other ways... implicated only at the crossroads of reflexivity and unconsciousness, the imaginary rips the present to pieces...].[57] Just like Durand above, Védrine sees digitization and the accompanying plethora of images as a force erasing the imaginary and replacing it by images without a background or a history. However, as the self-reflexive images discussed above indicate, they retain – and perhaps even enhance thanks to the presence of multiple images and image-making possibilities – the ability to reflect on their own nature in the manner most suitable for them: through the visual mode and almost without words. Indeed mimicry or quotation in images has a different essence than that of words; citations in images are usually part of their being and a means of their development. Most images are after all made with the aid of others; the great Masters learned their art through copying their predecessors

56 Pierre Fresnault-Deruelle, *La bande dessinée. Essai d'analyse sémiotique*, Paris, Hachette, 1973, p. 112.

57 Hélène Védrine, « Déclin du sujet et retour de l'imaginaire », dans Alain Cambier (dir.), *Les dons de l'image*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2003, p. 74.

and since the age of technical image-making, photographs often serve as models for artists.

Sartre concluded his *L'Imagination* by emphasizing the epistemological significance of the image: "L'image est un acte et non une chose. L'image est conscience de quelque chose." [The image is an act and not a thing. The image is consciousness of something.][58] The consciousness of the image revealed in some comics is self-consciousness, which can aid in the detection of certain images that form a part of the imaginary that remains. Already Malraux's imaginary museum was not made up exclusively of art works, instead

> [...] tout objet est éligible au registre des œuvres d'art, quelle que soit son origine, quelle que soit son époque, si elle s'inscrit dans ce dialogue de l'homme et d'un objet avec lequel il entre en résonance [any item is eligible as an art work, irrespective of its origin and epoch, if it is involved in a dialogue between man and an object with which it resonates].[59]

What is particularly significant is the comics' manipulation of key images such as the angels in *XX^e Ciel*, the dandelions marking time and evoking the poetic heritage of the Lake District in *One Bad Rat*, the Louvre artworks or Beatrix Potter's illustrations. The representation of other kinds of images and image-making techniques in comics is inevitably a compromise between the styles and methods of the fine arts and other practices like photography and of course, caricature. In addition, the appropriation or mimicry of other image-making techniques and the questions subsequently raised regarding connotations and status are characteristic of postmodernism, which according to Ihab Hassan

> can be 'defined' as a continuous inquiry into self-definition. This impulse is by no means restricted to the so-called West. The more interactive the globe, the more populations move, jostle, and grapple – this is the age of diasporas – the more questions of cultural, religious, and personal identity become acute – and sometimes specious. In still another transposition of postmodernism into postmodernity, you can hear the cry around the world: 'who are we? who am I?'.[60]

Comics, with their reiteration and reinvention, their splicing of media and their marginal cultural status echo these cries, probably more than ever before in the case of personal, historically and culturally introspective comics such as those analyzed here. And they do so via an astounding variety of techniques and themes ranging from the interaction of private spheres with cultural heritage as in *The Tale of the One Bad Rat* to the melange of media, history and fiction offered by the *XX^e Ciel* and Louvre-Futuropolis series. These comics exemplify a polyvalent, interactive way of meaning-making in sequential art. By using both words and images, they are able to incorporate and comment on various media with considerable immediacy through the visual facet.

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58 Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'imagination*, Paris, PUF, 2003, p. 162.

59 Michel Melot, *L'art selon André Malraux*.

60 Ihab Hassan, "From postmodernism to postmodernity: the local/ global context", www.ihabhassan.com/postmodernism_to_postmodernity.htm, retrieved 31 August 2012.

As Durand feared, the imaginary may be effaced in the wake of globalization and could be on its way to becoming more universal and more uniform. Images, especially those transferred between media and stemming from different cultures could be indicators of a more homogenous imaginary establishing itself. In the contemporary situation of omnipresent, frequently decontextualized images, self-reflexive images reflecting their own technical and connotational roles are therefore also expressions of the new global imaginary fed through rapid image reproduction and dissemination where, in keeping with the present inclination towards an "autobiography of an age", the role of the image itself is explored.[61]

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et Université de Gand)

61 *Idem*.

Légende des illustrations

Figure 1 : Covers of Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of Samuel Whiskers*, 1987 © Frederick Warne & Co. and Bryan Talbot's *One Bad Rat*, 1995 © Bryan Talbot.
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